

Working with Aboriginal People and Communities

(Summarised from a NSW DoCS Practice Resource 2009)

Offer and earn respect

Like all genuinely mutual and productive relationships, engagements with Aboriginal communities need to be based on respect. We need to offer and earn respect, particularly in dealings with community Elders and leaders.

Elders and community leaders not only hold key community knowledge but they also have **a great deal of influence over when, how and if a community will work** with those from outside. This is also true for other representatives of the local community. An Elder or leader may not necessarily be an older person. They may also be a younger person who is well respected within their community and holds significant community knowledge.

- Respect, acknowledge, actively listen and respond to the needs of Aboriginal people and communities in a culturally appropriate manner.
- Establish community advisory groups with local Elders and Aboriginal organisations, or access existing groups to ensure culturally relevant and sensitive service development and delivery.
- Respect cultural values, protocols and ways of doing business.
- Respect a community that has Sorry Business by not requesting meetings or work, for a period of two weeks or as advised by the community.
- Avoid displaying or broadcasting images of deceased people. If it is important to do so, make sure that you have permission from the person's family and/or community and include a relevant disclaimer.
- If appropriate, remunerate Aboriginal people for their time and expertise.
- If organising consultation or other types of meetings with Aboriginal people consider transport needs. If the meeting will go for over one or two hours, providing light refreshments is recommended.

Communication

Be sensitive to the use of non-verbal communication cues, which are a part of Aboriginal communication patterns.

The use of silence does not mean Aboriginal people do not understand, they may be listening, remaining non-committal or waiting for community support.

During discussions, Aboriginal people may delay expressing a firm opinion, preferring to listen to others' opinions first before offering their own.

If engagement seems difficult or time-consuming, remember that history has not given Aboriginal communities and families much reason to walk forward confidently in partnership. When communicating with Aboriginal families, consider other factors which may affect communication.

Do not continually ask a person to repeat themselves if it is difficult to understand them, especially in front of a large group.

Speak clearly and as loud as necessary but do not shout.

Use clear, uncomplicated language. Do not use jargon.

Some members of the Aboriginal community may have difficulty with numeracy and literacy. If you are working with members of the Aboriginal community who lack these skills, it may be necessary to provide assistance with completing forms, reading information and writing statements. It is important to approach this sensitively and not cause embarrassment or shame to the person by asking them whether or not they can read or

write.

When the time comes for the person to read or write something, ask them if they would like help or the help of a family or community member. In most cases the person will ask for assistance if they need it, provided the issue has been approached with sensitivity and respect.

Building rapport

Local corporations, organisations, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and working parties are good points of contact for establishing the correct people and groups to consult with in a particular community.

It may take time to establish these networks or to find out who the right people are. Again, spend the time to do this properly and it will help lay the groundwork for meaningful interaction with the community.

When building good rapport with the Aboriginal community remember that time spent with local Aboriginal community organisations, groups, Elders, children and families makes a difference to the engagement process. A couple of hours in the community each week, having a cup of tea and getting to know the people, is likely to save hours of work in the long run. Workers can learn how the community works, who they need to speak with and who can provide families with support.

Contact parenting groups or the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group to get to know the parents in the local community and schools.

Cultural bias

Cultural bias influences our actions as our perceptions are shaped by our own cultural context and experiences. When working cross- culturally it is easy to misinterpret what is going on within families; such misinterpretation leads to poor outcomes. For this reason, we need to actively recognise and monitor our own cultural bias and behaviour.

Participation

It is very important to play an active role in the community and participate in as many relevant community events and discussions as possible.

In the Aboriginal community word of mouth is very important and once an outsider is known as someone who has built trust and listens, the community will be eager to work with that person.

Having a community development focus in engaging Aboriginal organisations and communities is essential.

The community development approach means working closely with communities and recognising the strengths, skills and knowledge of local people.

Community development is based on the idea that local people already know what the issues and problems are and how to solve them.

Effective consultation with Aboriginal organisations and communities¹⁵

Engaging in proper consultation with Aboriginal people and communities on issues that affect them is an important process that must occur, particularly within government.

Effective consultations should occur early and throughout the decision making process, which requires **openness about how, why and when they are being consulted** and

how much influence they will have over the decisions being made.

To ensure the effective conduct of consultative processes, there is a need to:

- Identify the sort of representation required in the first instance.
- Work through local Aboriginal agencies to find the right person or group to link to and to get information on the best way to approach them.
- It is important to get this right to ensure that there are no divisions in the community.
- It must be understood that any consultations held with an Aboriginal community are **generally held with a representative group of members** of an Aboriginal community including key family groups, and not necessarily the whole population within a given area.
- Using the expression 'we have consulted with the Aboriginal community' implies that there has been a 100 per cent participation of Aboriginal people in the consultation process, when in fact it may only have been a small proportion of Aboriginal people who participated.

Participation may be based on a range of factors including levels of interest in the topic being put forward or availability.

Therefore, it would be more transparent to state that 'a group of Aboriginal people from the community have participated in the consultation process'.

Aboriginal people have often felt consultations left them powerless to affect government decision-making and for this reason prefer the term '**negotiation**', which implies a more equal relationship where parties work through any conflict, finding areas of agreement and agreeing to disagree if areas of conflict cannot be resolved.

Negotiation

This experience is well documented. 'Aboriginal communities have complained that in the past, consultation has been tokenistic. Negotiation needs to occur for equal relationships to develop'.

Therefore, when planning to seek the participation or views of Aboriginal people on various issues or projects, a decision must be made in regard to the type of process you are engaging in. Explanations of consultation and negotiation processes are outlined below.

A consultation process is used to seek information, advice or an opinion, permission or approval for a proposed action.

The consultation process would be used when approval of a program, policy or service (something that has already been developed) is required. The consultation process can be held at the beginning, middle and end of a project (preferably all three).

A negotiation process is used to confer with others in order to reach a compromise or agreement.

The negotiation process should occur at the very beginning of a process, before anything has been developed. **Negotiations take place to determine the overall purpose and direction of the project.**

It should be noted that: 'It is crucial to the success of programs if consultation and negotiation occurs so that a more **equal relationship** is developed'.

When developing an **equal relationship** it is important to '**recognise the specialist**

knowledge of particular community members and their potential contribution (to the consultation process), and involve such persons where possible and appropriate'.

Don't over-consult.

Many Aboriginal communities are bogged down with numerous requests for consultation that, in many cases, don't go anywhere and become repetitive. Before requesting consultation with Aboriginal people, ensure that the same type of consultation has not been undertaken recently. If it has, seek permission to use the outcomes from that consultation to inform the current project.

Before engaging in consultation with Aboriginal people, **determine what needs to be achieved from the consultation, develop a plan and stick to it.** This will ensure that the consultation has a clear direction and the people being consulted know what is required of them.

It is also vital to consult with Aboriginal people **who are knowledgeable about the issues** of their culture and community dynamics. Although it is a sensitive issue, there are many people that identify as Aboriginal later in life; this can be for several reasons, including ramifications from the Stolen Generation. Although newly identified people may be Aboriginal, they may have limited knowledge and connections to the Aboriginal culture and way of life therefore would not be the best people to consult with on Aboriginal-specific issues. Use best judgement and sensitivity in these circumstances.